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SUBJECT: OMANI DEFENSE AND INTELLIGENCE CHIEF WARNS OF  
IRANIAN EXPANSION, COMMENTS ON SUCCESSION

Classified By: Ambassador Gray A. Grappo per 1.5 (B and D).

¶1. (C) Summary: Iran has embarked on a policy of expansionism in the Arab and Muslim world, using religion to divide Arab Muslims, destabilize the region and threaten U.S. interests, according to Gen. Ali bin Majid al-Ma'amari, Minister of the Royal Office and Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces. In a one-on-one meeting with me January 21, Oman's nominal number two official said that Iran's actions are most apparent in Iraq but are also evident elsewhere in the region. Al-Ma'amari also stated that Sultan Qaboos would never appoint a successor as it would be contrary to traditional Ibadhi Omani principles. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Iranians Using Religion: Sultan Qaboos' closest advisor told me that the most alarming aspect of Iran's strategy is its use of religion to divide Arabs, "Sunni against Shi'a." The sectarian violence now seen in Iraq is symptomatic of the kind of political disruption that Iran seeks to provoke elsewhere. They are "fomenting revolution," he warned, and the countries of the Gulf as well as Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon are at risk. While most serious in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain because of their large Shi'a populations, Ali Majid expressed concern even for traditionally pacific Oman, where the small Shi'a population (less than five percent) has been fully integrated into Omani society and is well represented in government and business. "Religion is in the hearts of the people," he remarked, "and the Iranians know they can use it to manipulate Muslim emotions." Muslims, once emotionally aroused because of religion, would react "unpredictably."

¶3. (C) Don't Trust Maliki: Ali Majid stated that U.S. failure to establish stability in Iraq and resolve the Iraq crisis would be "disastrous for us and for you." "You must succeed," he firmly declared; "there's no other option." He said he was encouraged by the President's recent strategy announcement but cast doubt on the Iraqi leadership. "I don't think you can trust (Iraqi Prime Minister) Maliki; he's a Shi'a first and then an Iraqi." The General stopped short of calling for a leadership change in Baghdad, but warned that the U.S. should not count on Maliki. "Sunni Arabs inside and outside of Iraq have lost all confidence in him," he claimed.

¶4. (C) Saddam Execution "Grave Mistake": In his comments to me, Ali Majid was most critical of the Iraqi government's mishandling of the Saddam Hussein execution. He characterized the 'Eid holiday hanging as "a grave mistake," a political "holiday gift" to the Shi'a and a blunt provocation and warning to the Sunni. It was the clearest evidence yet of PM Maliki's bias toward Iraqi Shi'a, at the expense of the nation's better interest.

¶5. (C) U.S. Military Actions: General Ali Majid expressed considerable interest in U.S. military plans to confront Iran. In particular, he wanted to know more about the recent deployment of a second carrier task force group to the Gulf region. If it was to make a show a force, he said, then it was a good idea, but he also wanted assurances we would not "provoke" the Iranians and give them the political advantage.

¶6. (C) Oman's "Democratic" Succession: In describing Iran's attempts to divide Muslims, al-Ma'amari explained the origins of Oman's dominant Ibadhi (approximately 60 percent) Muslim sect. Ibadhis, he said, became the first "splinter" group within Islam when, as part of the Khawarij movement, they opposed hereditary inheritance of the leadership of Islam in the eighth century. They preferred leaders accepted by the majority as best qualified to lead Muslims. As such, said al-Ma'amari, Ibadhis were Islam's "first democrats." Every sultan in the history of Oman since the establishment of the Al Sa'id dynasty in the mid-eighteenth century has first had to secure the support of the ruling family followed by that of Oman's principal tribes. To illustrate, he explained that in 1970 when Qaboos overthrew his father, he shunned the title of Sultan for almost two weeks until he had received the approval of the ruling family and major tribes throughout Oman. "Even the support of the army was insufficient; to be accepted by the people, he needed the royal family's and the tribes' endorsement." Therefore, the General emphasized, Sultan Qaboos will never designate a successor; such an act "would contradict our 'democratic' Ibadhi tradition, violate the Sultan's own principles and be rejected by Omanis."

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¶7. (C) Comment: General Ali Majid's remarks on Iranian machinations in the region are the strongest I have heard yet from a senior Omani. Muscat probably enjoys the best relationship with Tehran of any Arab capital. But the armed forces commander and intelligence chief made clear that Iran's plan to divide and weaken Arab governments by pitting Shi'a against Sunni, with whom Ibadhi Omanis more closely associate, presents a genuine threat to the Sultanate's security and stability and to its reputation for religious tolerance.

¶8. (C) Comment continued: Although not raised in his discussion with me, I have learned that Ali Majid and others in the armed forces leadership have expressed disappointment that they have not been visited and briefed by senior USG officials about our military plans for dealing with Iran or our recent actions in Iraq. (Since the Vice President's visit to Oman one year ago, the most senior USG visitor to Oman has been Undersecretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Joseph in April 2006.) I recommend that we try to do so as soon as possible in order to keep this important Gulf ally adequately informed.  
GRAPPO